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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000137

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SUBJECT: YOUNG LEADERS OF "STRONG TURKEY" CALL FOR CHANGE

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A Wiener for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Young Leaders of Anatolia (AGL) NGO draws a significant portion of its 9,175 members from Eastern Turkey and seeks to empower Turkish youth and promote democratic values. In 2006, AGL formed the libertarian, youth-led Strong Turkey Party (GTP) to further AGL's goals of democracy, secularism, and rule of law in the political arena. In a recent meeting, GTP Deputy Chairmen Goksel Akman (Istanbul) and Idris Kardas (Diyarbakir), and GTP member Leyla Erdogan criticized the structure of the Turkish government and education system and identified a role for their new party in the opposition vacuum facing ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). END SUMMARY.

From Young Leaders to Strong Turkey

12. (C) Istanbul-based NGO the Young Leaders of Anatolia (AGL) strives to promote liberal democratic values among young Turks through democratization events, many in majority Kurdish areas, and international youth conferences often focusing on democracy in the Middle East. In 2006, AGL head Tuna Beklevic founded the Strong Turkey Party (GTP) to pursue AGL's goals for a secular, democratic Turkey under the rule of law. Deputy Chairman Goksel Akman told us recently that GTP aims to establish Turkey's first civilian constitution and will provide a libertarian, trustworthy alternative to current Turkish parties in opposition to ruling AKP. Like AGL, GTP draws a significant minority of its supporters from Kurds in Southeastern Turkey. In the run-up to the 2007 national election, GTP did not establish itself in enough municipalities to qualify to run candidates in the election. The party plans to run candidates in the 2009 municipal elections.

Turkish Institutional Dysfunction

13. (C) AGL members explained to us that Turks have a pronounced distrust of the political system, especially in majority Kurdish areas. Deputy Chairman Idris Kardas claimed Turks are interested in current events and politics, "but they only talk" - they don't get involved. Akman blamed military interference in civilian politics for eroding public trust, contending Ataturk's 1924 constitution was more liberal than Turkey's current constitution, written after the 1980 military coup d'etat. AGL members maintained Ataturk's reforms had been positive for 1920's Turkey, but argued modern Turkey faces a different world, demanding change, if not in the basic principles, then at least in the interpretation of Ataturk's reforms. AGL members described both Islamist conservatives and staunch secularists as obstacles to democratization because they refuse to

compromise. Kardas blamed their resistance on two sets of ingrained "dogma." "The Islamists have God and the secularists have Ataturk," he said. "There is Mecca and there is Ataturk's mausoleum."

Education or Indoctrination?

¶4. (C) AGL members severely criticized the Turkish education system for not allowing children to think for themselves. Kardas complained to us that schools only teach songs and poems about Ataturk. "Ataturk was a big man for Turkey," Kardas said, but education should include other important Turkish figures as well, such as Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's only Nobel laureate. He attributed Pamuk's omission to his statements about Turks having killed Armenians and Kurds, which do not conform to history lessons children "memorize and memorize."

¶5. (C) Leyla Erdogan told us universities allow more freedom of thought than primary and secondary schools, but said she felt freedom of expression is still stifled in higher education. AGL members pointed to Turkish Penal Code Article 301, which criminalizes "insulting Turkishness," as a main obstacle to academic freedom of expression. Much of GTP's limited press focuses on their demonstrations against Article 301. In addition to reforming Article 301, Akman believed the Higher Education Council (YOK), which governs universities in Turkey, should be abolished because it supports restrictions on critical thinking in universities.

Insincere AKP in an Opposition Vacuum

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¶6. (C) Akman emphasized that 53% of Turks did not vote for the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2007 elections and gave their votes to parties he did not consider a viable opposition. According to Akman, this proved Turks doubt the AKP's commitment to liberal reforms, a civilian constitution, and EU accession. Distrust of the AKP was greatly fueled by public suspicion of AKP's religious motives, Akman contended.

¶7. (C) Kardas downplayed concerns of top-down Islamification, referring to a long-standing controversy over building a mosque in the Taksim area, a project promoted by PM Erdogan when he was mayor of Istanbul in 1994. Alcohol cannot be sold within 100 meters of a mosque in Turkey. Kardas said the initiative's intention was to impose a vice-free buffer zone around the mosque to prohibit alcohol sales in Istanbul's most famous tourist and nightlife center. The proposal was smothered by the public, an experience Leyla Erdogan believed helped AKP "learn from their time in office" to tone down religious initiatives. Akman disagreed, insisting a distinction must be made between the AKP on the municipal level and the national level. He claimed the national AKP moderates religious positions to appease skeptics, while AKP-run municipalities can enforce religiously-motivated laws less conspicuously.

¶8. (C) AGL members and GTP party leaders remain optimistic about Turkey's future as a secular democratic nation. Akman insisted Turkey is ready for democratization and liberal freedoms. The question is who will lead Turkey through the process.

¶9. (C) COMMENT. Unencumbered by strategic loyalties or imposed party lines, AGL's young members call for serious reinterpretation of dated Kemalist dogma and doubt AKP's sincerity and strength. Their assessment of current issues and aspirations for their own party provide a perspective on Turkey's current political mix - they have put their finger on many of this country's neuralgic points. However, translating ideas into workable political strategies takes

experience and dedicated leadership hard to come by for a young party. GTP promises to be a progressive party, but first it must overcome the challenge of finding enough support to make a dent in the current political situation.
END COMMENT.
WIENER